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ABSTRACT

One teacher's conference method of teaching a freshman English-as-a-second-language (ESL) composition course uses a system of periodic fifteen-minute student-teacher conferences instead of written comments on compositions. The conferences are followed by student revision and resubmission of the composition as many times as necessary. During the conference, the teacher and student decide together what improvements should be made in the essay, based on the teacher's notes about the draft. Meaning in the composition is addressed first, and form second. Each essay accompanies or follows an in-class lesson on concepts used in writing. The contents of the lessons are determined by the needs of the class. The method has been found to be more efficient for the teacher and more effective for students, who get better feedback through conferences, learn more from participating in decisions about the composition, and become more comfortable with the writing and revision processes. An appendix provides examples of students' compositions at different times in the academic year, and the teacher's notes on the progress evident in some of the essays, which is attributed to conferencing. (MSE)

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WRITING WITHOUT TEARS:

ADVANCED WRITING FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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> It's a very cold day outside and the air is brisk and thin. To the normal person they bundle up and stumble off to class, yet for many people on a day like this they have trouble breathing, the reason for this is because they suffer from Asthma.
>
> Asthma is defined as, "an often allergic disorder of respiration characterized by wheezing, difficulty in expiration, and a feeling of constriction in the chest." Many people suffer from Asthma, it cannot be cured but can be controlled with medication. This medication can be taken by inhaling it or taking in pill form. Many people have been known to outgrow it but there is no maraculous cure.
>
> Asthma can be caused by changes in the weather, dust or changes in the climate. In short, anything that effects the change in the lungs breathing pattern.
>
> Asthma is suffered by millions of Americans but you can't tell who they are. As I said above there is no cure but maybe one day someone will come along with a miraculous drug to defeat Asthma.

This essay, the first draft for an in-class writing, was composed by an American freshman student. It is typical of the kind of writing many of us see from freshman students when we ask that they write about something they know about; the kind that makes us weep and leave our desks, hoping we will know what to do with it when we return. Certainly there are grammatical problems, some spelling and punctuation errors, but overall the essay is understandable. Even so, if the errors were corrected, the paper would still not be very good; it simply doesn't have much substance. There are clues that the writer has something interesting to tell, but it hasn't yet been told. As teachers of such writers, we face the dilemma of what to do in our classes which will make a significant difference in students' written communication in one semester. We must also judge such writing

and give it a grade which will reflect the standards we expect, and encourage the student to work harder while not discouraging him so much that he gives up. Like many ESL and composition teachers, I have struggled for years with the quagmire of theories and the abundance of good ideas, trying to put sound theory and research into practice in my classroom in order to address the needs of students and improve the quality of writing. This is no simple task since the available textbooks often just put new names on old approaches and the daily management of our teaching assignments requires all our energies. The good ideas sometimes work and sometimes don't, but never have the unity of a sound approach, grounded in philosophical principles which have been developed and supported by research and authority. We are often admonished to reach for excellence, but as classroom teachers we are left on our own to develop practical applications of good theory, and sound principles to support clever practice.

This paper attempts to explain how teaching writing as a communicative and discovery process can be accomplished. The approach I use is a conference method[1] linked with in-situ ESL methodology. Using a conference-centered approach, my freshman composition course has become an organized and very manageable class for me. I have been able to use ESL in-situ methodology to

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1 The conference approach that I use is a modified version of the one-to-one technique developed by Roger Garrison. I modify it, because I cannot conduct my classes as continual conferences; I do not have two tutors to help me, my classes each have thirty or more students, and the approach is very unconventional for the region where I teach.

structure the class lessons so that I now have a philosophical base from which to choose the content and strategies of the course.

My discovery of this methodology came from my own frustrations, and failures, with traditional methods and good intentions. When the conference method was first suggested to me, I liked the idea, but could not see how it would work in my situation. I needed to know the details and they were unavailable. It is that lack of clear example that prompts me to share the specifics that have worked out for me, so that other educators will have a model from which to begin.

The first semester I tried conferencing, I had a class of international students, most of whom I had had the previous semester. The differences in those two semesters was dramatic for me and my students. The progress they made in their writing was clear and substantial.[2] All of us felt better about writing and the efforts we were making. Since that first semester, I have continued to use conferencing with native and non-native speakers of English, even in the same class, and every semester my students continue to respond positively. They tell me on final evaluations that they have become less fearful of writing, more willing to revise and more confident of their abilities to

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[2] For an example of beginning and end of term writings from a semester using the conference approach and from a semester not using conferencing, please see the student examples in the appendix. Essays #1, 2 and 3, all by the same German student, show the leaps in communicative competency made in the second semester.

communicate their own ideas on paper. The progress they make from the beginning of the term to the end is apparent and rewarding.

The way I use conferencing is certainly not the only way. It is a way that works for me in my present situation. It is my intention that other teachers take what they can use, modify it to fit their own needs and teaching style, and add to it their own experience and personality. That is what I have done, and will continue to do, now that my students and I can write without tears.

The Principles

In order to avoid actions which have no continuity because they have no philosophical or theoretical grounding, it is essential that the basic principles supporting any method be understood.[3]

Learning how to approach a writing task is more important than producing a finished product. This is the essence of teaching writing as a process rather than teaching production of writing. To learn to write, you must write, and perfect copy will not come out the first time pen touches paper. Building written fluency takes a great deal of time and practice, and you shouldn't be penalized for practicing and making false starts,

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[3] Ann Berthoff says of the importance of theory and practice that "theory and practice need one another because principles are easily forgotten unless they are put to the test, and practical suggestions can't be counted on to help you more than once, unless they are grounded in principle" (9).

especially if you learn from these attempts.

Writing is more than controlling forms on paper; it involves communicative competence. Writing here is taken to be more than copying someone else's words. Rather, I am using "writing" to convey the meaning attributed to it in composition courses. Writing, then, assumes a thought from the writer which is to be transmitted to the reader through a written medium. ESL methodology speaks of communicative competence, usually in connection with oral skills, but the same notion applies to written communication. There must be a desire to communicate (purpose) with other people (a real audience) using language that is genuine to the writer (an authentic voice).

These ideas are not new; advocates of writing as a process speak of the writer as engaged in the writing, actually carrying on a dialogue with the reader.[4] The difficulty has been allowing this principle to function in the classroom without the laissez faire command to "just write" or the restricting traditional requirements to write what the teacher or textbook has already decided you should write.

The purpose of teaching composition is to develop independence in the learner. We assume that students will need to write, to compose, in other academic and life situations. If individuals did not learn to write, society would still need a

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[4] Berthoff speaks of auditing meaning by listening in on the inner dialogue, thinking, and checking it against what we have written (47). To develop this critical ear in students means they can analyze their own writing and revise accordingly.

class of scribes and letter-writers to translate oral communication into written communication. However, since we require composition classes, we seem to have decided that written communication is practical, even essential, for individuals. In teaching composition, then, we must foster independence and student control. When assigned topics are abandoned, the teacher is no longer responsible for clever and interesting topics that have imaginary, but possible, audiences. Instead, the teacher helps students to discover their own interesting topics and real audiences. All of us know things that are worth sharing with others, but students have been conditioned for so long to believe that they can only repeat other people's ideas and words that it sometimes take a great deal of energy to break the nothing-to-write-about syndrome.[5]

The role of the teacher is to be a guide. The word educator comes to us from a root meaning "to lead." As a mentor, the teacher's role is to provide the student with strategies for approaching a writing task. These approaches may include overcoming the fear of writing, beginning, finding a thought to

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5 There is an underlying philosophy here that is basic to all the rest; students are people, who deserve respect and can make valuable contributions to me, and others. My classroom does not function with me, as an authority, filling empty vessels with things they should know. Rather, I see us as a community of learners, struggling to discover what we already know, and what others know that we have not yet experienced. Then we struggle some more in order to communicate in written form what we have learned. Such struggling is not futile effort, but, like childbirth, the natural process of creating. Helping students to see the struggle as worthy and natural is an effort, to be sure, but once they have accepted it, we are well on the way to alleviating fears and feelings of inadequacy.

communicate in the midst of previous or current experience, and practice in making meaning by making relationships.[6] The teacher then provides feedback, or the opportunity for others to give the writer feedback, which will help the student express the thought more clearly. In our educational system, the teacher must later change hats and be the grade giver. Hopefully, having served the student well as a guide, mentor, editor, evaluator- without-grade-book, the teacher can fulfill the task of grading with the minimum of discomfort for herself and her students.

Feedback is an essential part of writing and learning to write. Because writing is a communication process, the writer needs a response from others in order to know whether his effort to communicate has succeeded or not. Giving feedback is not the same as giving grades. Grades are judgments. Feedback is part of the communication dialogue. Feedback can be provided by the teacher, but it can also be provided by others, including other student writers. After feedback, writers, especially student writers, are much more likely to be able to re-see, and thus revise, their written effort. The revisions produced from such feedback are not the surface corrections of local errors[7] (which do little to improve the communication), but instead, the

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6 The making of meaning as the making of relationships is an explanation well made by Berthoff.

7 I am relying here on the language and concept of global and local errors from Marina K. Burt. Her article, "Goof Analysis in English as a Second Language," explains this concept, and gives examples that show how local corrections do not improve the comprehensibility of the text.

rethinking and rewriting of the thought so as to clarify the piece as a whole. As with other process advocates, I see little reason to correct spelling if the general content is unfocused or unclear.

Talking about a piece of writing is more efficient, productive and helpful than marking it. Thomas Carnicelli points out the efficiency of talking with students about their writing rather than marking errors and making comments (106-108). My own experience has proven to me that students do more revisions, as opposed to surface corrections, after an oral conference than when written comments are put on their papers.[8] With conferencing, I can help students to rethink their ideas, clarify what they are trying to say, and develop the topic as a more focused piece of writing. I can do this much more efficiently and effectively in a fifteen minute conference than I can in written comments.

The Procedures: An Overview

With these principles in mind, it is time we got to the specifics. What, exactly, do I do? Basically, students write a new essay in class every two weeks. These are collected and put into individual student folders. During my office hours for the following week, and every alternating week throughout the term,

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[8] For an example of the difference conferences can make in a student's ability and willingness to revise, compare the essays in the appendix. Essay #4, by a Laotian student, shows the revision attempted after written comments. Essay #6 illustrates revisions after conferencing.

each student meets with me for a private, fifteen minute conference to discuss the draft he is currently working on. After the conference, the student revises the essay and turns it in again on the next in-class essay day. This schedule allows me to spread the conferences throughout the week and still give even the last student I see in the conference week a full week to complete the revisions. See Figure #1.[9]

During the conference, the student and I decide <u>together</u> what the essay needs in order to be better. By reading the draft, and making a few notes for myself before the student comes for the conference, I can help the student decide what should be done next. If I decide alone, then the conference becomes me telling the student what to do, rather than me helping the student to take responsibility for the writing and the improving of the writing. Also, I find that I cannot decide without the student explaining the intention, clarifying the meaning or putting the writing into the context of his own life.[10] Carnicelli points out that when teachers mark papers without the benefit of input from the student writer in a conference, they

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9 Although the example shows the rotation for a single class, it is possible to do more classes by alternating them, doing a different class of conferences each week. Colleagues at a junior college who must contend with night classes and working students who are not available for afternoon conferences utilize some of their class time to do conferences in rotation. Even if your teaching load requires that you see each student less often, some conferencing is better than none.

10 For an example of a student essay and the changes made after the conference that clarified the student's intention, see the appendix, essays #5 and #6 by a Laotian student.

Figure #1: Rotation Schedule

Week	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
1	Lesson		Lesson		Lesson
2	Lesson		Lesson		Essay #1
3	Lesson		Lesson		Lesson
	Conferences on 1st essay during office hours				
4	Lesson		Lesson		Essay #2 1st revisions due
5	Lesson		Lesson		Lesson
	Conferences on revisions during office hours				
	Rotation continues through term				

are operating in a vacuum (107). I find that keeping a log of the things agreed upon at the conference, and having the student write down these same items on the paper to be revised, helps jog both our memories, and makes the revisions more successful. An example of a log with the type of comments I fill in before and during the conference can be seen in figure #2.

Figure #2: Conference Record

CONFERENCE RECORD NAME: (student from Mexico)

DATE	COMMENTS (written before conference)	REVISIONS NEEDED/DUE (written during conference)
2-3-86	who for? why? how do you know? (essay was about Mexicans in U.S. illegally)	1) try explaining to Americans, forced by conditions to come, but this isn't home 2) show your personal knowledge 3) add examples due F Feb 14
2-17-86	still need to hear your voice	1) main idea sentence for each paragraph 2) let the pain you feel come through due F. Feb 28

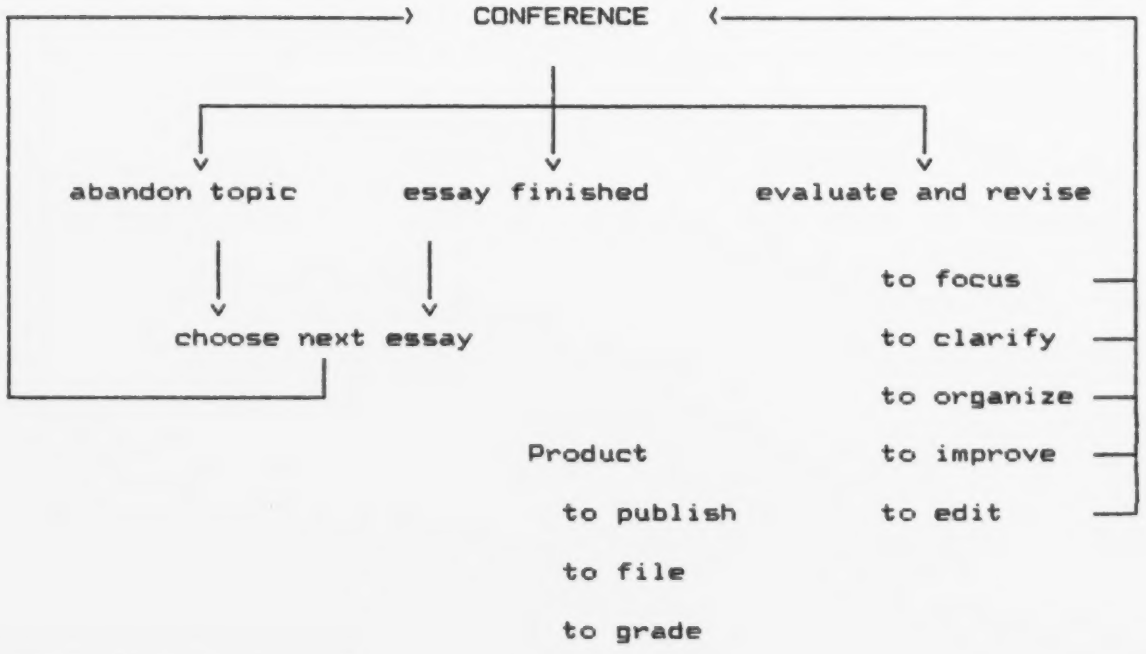
(log continues throughout semester)

At the second conference, the student has two essays; the first, which has been revised, and the second which was produced in class on the second essay writing day. During the second conference, the revised version of the first essay is discussed again and the student and I agree on what should happen to it next. If it still needs revision, the student will continue to

work with the first essay and turn in the third draft of the first essay on the day the class writes the third in-class essay. If the student and I agree to call the first essay "finished"[11] or if we agree that the piece isn't working and needs to be abandoned, then the second essay is discussed and revisions for that essay are planned.

I've developed the flow chart, figure #3, to illustrate the kinds of choices students have about a particular piece of writing.

Figure #3: Conference Choices



11 Students understand from class discussions that a piece of writing is seldom truly finished; there is almost always more that can be done. For our purposes, "finished" means the best the student is capable of, given the topic they have chosen. It usually represents a paper to be graded, though final editing is still possible, and encouraged, at the end of the term.

The flow chart also illustrates the movement from global considerations of meaning and content to local considerations of word choice and spelling. This helps me stay focused on the meaning first, form second, even when dealing with the chronic misspellings of dyslexic students or the grammatical errors of ESL students. If the error interferes with the message, it's a problem that has to be taken care of immediately. If, on the other hand, it is simply the ignoring of a standard convention, it can wait until later. Don't misunderstand me. I don't encourage students to write nonstandard English or to ignore spelling errors, but I do put those surface errors in last place. I insist on good, clear writing that communicates a focused message and once we have that, we clean it up so no one will be embarrassed by the mistakes. I have been consistently amazed at how grammatical errors, especially for ESL students, take care of themselves when communication becomes important to the student, not just to the teacher.

Sometimes, students get uneasy about working so much on a single paper, but I can usually convince them that the paper is getting significantly better and that they are adding depth to their skills by continuing to work on the same piece rather than jumping to another topic. Often students work on the first essay for three or even four revisions, but the things they learn are quickly applied to other essays, so that they begin to draft stronger pieces to begin with and know better how to improve them. It is this application of skills that shows real learning

and builds confidence.[12]

By the end of the semester, students have six different essays drafted. Some of them will have been revised, perhaps even finished, others will still be "in the raw." Two weeks before the end of the semester, students spend a week of class time doing final revisions and selecting their three best essays. These are graded and carry the heaviest weight for the term grade. I am required to give a final in-class essay, and I also consider the homework from reading assignments in arriving at the term grade.

The Lessons

As shown on the rotating schedule in figure #1, conferences and in-class essays follow class lessons. In designing these lessons, I rely on the five-stage learning cycle explained by Brewster and Brewster in their in-situ method language book, Language Acquisition Made Practical (LAMP). The cycle begins with deciding what should be learned. Preparation of material, practice, communication and evaluation follow. When evaluating, the learner and the mentor decide how successful the attempt to communicate has been and further lessons are planned.

In deciding on lessons, then, I let the needs of the class dictate the content. Generally, I begin each semester with strategies to discover a topic. I almost always include several

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12 An example of improvement in writing a first draft can be seen by comparing essay #7 to essay #5, both by the same Laotian student.

lessons on perspective and point of view. Towards the end of the semester I use peer revisions to concentrate on surface corrections and, at times, I spend a small amount of class time on such items as parallel construction or punctuation of subordinate clauses. Usually I explain these grammatical points as they arise in individual papers, but sometimes the whole class benefits from such an explanation.

In presenting material I always try to present the concept in a way that will provide a memorable experience for students. Once they have experienced the concept, we apply it to writing. Also, I make plenty of time for practice which may take the form of journal entries or in-class freewriting.

I use essays from a reader to illustrate writers writing and talking about their writing process. These same essays are used for class discussions in an effort to further critical thinking and provide content for oral and written reaction and analysis. Our composition curriculum requires the use of these essays, but even if it didn't I would teach reading because, in Berthoff's words, "composing is best nurtured by interpreting texts as well as experience" (7).

The Benefits

As reported by JoAn McGuire Simmons in her studies of California Universities, students in classes using a conferencing approach make more progress in producing good writing than similar students in classes using traditional instruction (6). The same studies indicate that students and teachers have higher

morale when the conferencing approach is used (Simmons 13,14). My own experience confirms both of these findings. Every semester I lose a few. What teacher doesn't? But I lose fewer than I did before, and I feel better about my efforts in teaching. Students continue to report better feelings about writing, revising, and English classes in general.

For me, conferencing means that grading doesn't become more important than teaching. It also means that although I continue to work very hard, most of my work can be done in my office and I no longer carry home stacks of papers to read and mark and worry about. At the end of a day's scheduled conferences, or sometimes in a break between conferences, I can quickly read the papers for the few students I will see in conference the next day. Even the end of semester evaluations go much more quickly and more easily because at that point I am not trying to use the grade as a tool for feedback or as a motivator, only as the measurement of the essay against a standard. Since the student will not see the final papers again, I do not correct or point out errors, nor do I write comments. Instead, I read and give a holistic grade for the finished paper.[13] By keeping all the student's work in a folder, I can explain a grade, or allow students to make copies of their essays at the end of the semester.

By using a conference method I feel that I am teaching my

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13. I have found the Jacobs' English Ability Profile, by H.L. Jacobs et.al., to be especially helpful even with native-English speakers. The profile weights content and communication more heavily than grammatical or mechanical considerations.

students to write effectively and to appreciate the power, fun and learning that can come from language. Now that I have a method and a system for using that method, I can focus my own attention on creating learning experiences for the classroom that give students strategies for improving their writing while fostering the development of thought, discovery and communication. Theory has found its way into practice so that activities are unified and consistent. Teaching writing, like the act of writing, is never really easy, but I have fewer tears now, and so do my students.

Appendix

The example below is of a student I had for two semesters. The first semester I did not use conferencing, the second semester I did. This is a student from Germany, actually the best student I had in a class for international students. His very first essay looked like this:

Essay #1 by a German student

Today we want to introduce Kalsom Latif to the readers of our student-newspaper. She is one of many foreign students who study at West Texas State University. Kalsom comes from Malaysia, to say it more exactly from Keda, which is her home-town. She is nineteen years old and is starting studying as a Freshman. Being very interested in all kinds of finance her major is accountance. Her native language is Malay but at home one is used to mix it up with English. During an interview she told us that a king reigned Malaysia but nevertheless it was a democratic government. Her religious belief is the Islam which is the most frequent one in her native country. She lives in a family with five sisters and two brothers. Kalsom has been living in the United States for seven months. She says that she likes to be at our university. Let's wish her a nice time.

At the end of the first semester, using traditional teaching methods, this student had not made much, if any, progress in producing acceptable English composition. This is his last essay of that first semester:

Essay #2 by a German student

As a matter of fact inventions are very dangerous. Even, if an invention might be useful from someone's point of view, it always has its negative aspects referring to human beings' egotism. For example, the computer does not only help our economy to increase its production, so that you can make more money, but, what is more important, it heightens the rate of unemployment and makes mankind dependent on it. The computer is about to dominate human beings if the development goes on. The most threatening example is the invention of how to divide nuclear mass. The bad

consequence is the nuclear bomb, frightening every human being, as it is able to exterminate all the life on earth. This is a perversion of every inventive spirit.
In conclusion we have to be aware of the jeopardies which arise by inventions as a result of man's impulse to destroy.

I think it is very evident why I was so discouraged at the end of this first semester. This was my best student, and even his essay made very little sense. You can imagine what the other students were producing. The next semester I began using conferencing. Toward the end of that semester, the student wrote the following essay and after only a couple of conferences, we submitted it to the campus paper where it appeared as a guest column.

Essay #3 by a German student

Dear Editor:

Giving multiple choice tests to students in schools and universities contradicts the main goals of education. Actually, this kind of exam inhibits the student's ability to conceptualize, to verbalize himself clearly, and to learn. On the other hand, essay tests, even though they are subjective and cause more work, serve the purpose of quality education, and therefore they give the student a better chance for his future career.

Taking primarily multiple choice tests has various negative impacts on the student's education. Since those exams require not much more activity than selecting one out of four answers, the student's capacity for cognitive understanding is repressed. He is not challenged to put ideas together, nor to develop a logical train of thought for analyzing and solving problems.

Consequently, the student learns a passivity which affects his writing skills, too. He does not have to worry about grammar, punctuation, or the neatness of his essay, nor does he have to gain the competency to formulate concepts in an organized and understandable way. Since multiple choice tests have become predominant in our schools, the only chance for a student to learn how to write effectively is the English class. This rare opportunity to practice essay writing can generate serious difficulties for the student in his future career when he will have to compose letters, reports, and other kinds of written work in his job.

The primary reason why multiple choice tests are undesirable for our education system is the fact that students simply learn less. The explanation for the decrease in learning is that the student has a relatively high chance to pass such an exam without complete knowledge of the material. Anybody who is experienced in taking multiple choice tests knows that conceptual understanding is most of the time not necessary to make a good grade. Instead, it seems to be sufficient when students skip through the material by memorizing names, keywords, important phrases, and definitions. In order to recall this information on a test, it has to be fresh in mind. This aspect clarifies why many students have made it a habit to study only the day before an exam. However, cramming has the negative effect that information is put in the short-term, but not in the long-term memory. Subsequently, most of the students who procrastinate are unable to recall the material they studied a few days after the test. The critical point is the multiple choice tests encourage many students to put off studying until the last moment and, unfortunately, it works. Therefore, these exams restrain the learning process. In his book, Taxonomy of Education, Benjamin S. Bloom, describing different levels of comprehension, distinguishes clearly between the ability to simply recognize familiar material and the skill to synthesize and evaluate information.

The skill that he calls "true knowledge" is necessary to answer essay questions because this type of exam requires sufficient comprehension of the covered material. The results show how knowledgeable and capable the student is in developing and explaining ideas logically. Of course, we all know how awfully difficult it is to write something that has substance even though we are under pressure because of a time-limit. However, isn't this skill exactly what we should learn? Isn't understanding concepts more important than memorizing details? The fact that there are students graduating from high school who are illiterate should be a sign to us to rethink our education program. Given that multiple choice tests are inappropriate for schools and universities, one can ask the question: Why have they been initiated? In response I can think of two main reasons:

First, teachers and principals must have become tired of hearing complaints about unjust grading of essays. Multiple choice tests seemed to be an alternative since they are considered to be objective tests. In my opinion it's not quite true that they are entirely objective. Of course, there is no doubt that the grading of these exams can not be manipulated. For instance, the teacher can not, like in an essay test, value one answer over another because of specific preferences or personal favors. However it is questionable whether the answer-choices in multiple guess test are objective. Very often it seems to me that questions ask for opinions, specific phrases, or unimportant details which are not worth memorizing. In addition, not only IQ-multiple choice tests, but also exams given in

schools and universities can have the tendency to be culturally biased or language unfair which makes it more difficult for all the students who are not white, middle-class Americans.

The other reason for initiating the multiple choice system must have been the idea that by "computerizing" exams, schools and universities would be able to save money. Indeed, since the grading of a multiple choice test does not take much time, no more teachers have to be hired even if classes become bigger and bigger. The dilemma is that this kind of exam has the advantage that both teachers and students have an easier time. Unfortunately, they feel very comfortable with the multiple guess system which keeps them from taking actions against it. I come from a country which does not use multiple choice tests at all although the universities over there frequently have classes with 200 and more students. Requiring only essay tests is possible because every professor has many assistants who help him to manage this huge amount of work.

In conclusion, multiple choice tests interfere with the original objectives of quality education. That's why we need to face reality. Isn't the price we pay for being economical and having less work and trouble too high? Considering his future profession he desires, it is essential that he can express himself clearly in order to compete with others. Making crosses neither improves his cognitive abilities nor his knowledge, but decreases his opportunities to realize the career he wants. What we need here in the universities of the United States is an administration that is willing to invest time and money so that multiple choice tests can be abolished. For the sake of the students and their future, quality education has to come before ease.

Although there are still some problems with this essay, the progress the student had made in writing extended, academic discourse during the second semester convinced me that conferencing worked. The ideas expressed, and even the initial topic, came from him, not me. When he came for his first conference, I mentioned to him that some of his ideas were similar to cognitive development discussed by Benjamin Bloom. That clue and his own motivation to express the ideas clearly led him to the library to do some research on taxonomy of questions, and on long and short term memory. I did not <u>require</u> that he

research those things; he researched because the content and his interest in communicating demanded it. Actually, this student still comes by once a week with his journal for me to read, because as a computer science major he feels he doesn't get enough opportunity to write and as he says, "I like putting down my ideas on paper and discovering what I really think." What better success could a teacher of writing hope for? True, this is an outstanding student, motivated and intelligent, but as I hope to demonstrate with the other examples, conferencing works for the weakest students and those in the middle as well. In fact, Simmons reports in her study that the approach is successful across socio-economic lines and is even more successful with basic writers and second language learners (6,11).

The following essay was written by a Laotian student in a freshman composition course specifically for ESL students. At the time this was written, I was not conferencing with students but using traditional proof-reader marks to guide corrections and written comments to prompt revisions. I was also grading every draft.

Essay #4 by a Laotian student

Schooling as a child

I went to school when I was five years old. I attended first grade with many other children. The teacher said that I was the best. I knew that I was ahead of those children. My parent taught me how to read, and write at home. I was ahead of them because of those experiences. I never failed a class. I

was an honor rolls student for every semesters through my six years of elementary school. Everybody were prouded of me. Especially my parent. And I was so glad that I got something for them to get prouded of.

My written comment to this student was, "It doesn't seem finished. What happened next? How is it different from now?" I purposely marked only the major grammatical mistakes and what I got back as revisions were surface corrections on the same piece of paper as the original, with this extra sentence added to the back of the page.

I always remembered that was the best way to make people get proud of me. And I always kept that kind of challege for my future.

I suppose I should have been content that at least the student had learned that pride has an irregular past participle. I wasn't content. I wasn't even satisfied that these were revisions, but I had, at the time, no other strategies to get the student to rethink his effort.

The next essay, written by the same Laotian student, was a first draft produced early in the term in which I first tried to use conferencing.

Essay #5 by a Laotian student

Unemployement in the U.S.

The biggest goal for the our economic system is to have full-employment. Full employment doesn't mean that everyone in the United must have jobs. instead it means that the lowest percentage of unemployment that we have in the certain period of time. There is no such thing as zero unemployment. There is

always some people will be unemploy.

The lowest unemployment that we have had was 4%. That was in 1946 which is the period that people in United States start to make a lot of war supplies. Since 1946, our nation's employment problem had been very much concern because the unemployment rate has been rising. The causes of this problem may had come from the part growing populations, and the replacement of human labors with robots. For example, the major automobile companies, like FORD, CRYSLER and General Motors, had laid off many of their employees because of robots replacement.

When I read this essay before the conference I had no idea what I should suggest to him. This was not the first time I had received an essay of this type from this student and I did not know how to get him involved in his writing. Frankly, my inclination was to tell him to start over with yet another topic, or perhaps to drop the course all together. When he came for his conference and I asked why he had chosen this topic, I was surprised to hear him begin to talk about how people in Amarillo hated the Laotians because they took jobs from Americans, but that it wasn't the fault of the refugees. Now I had an idea of what he wanted to communicate. In the conference we talked about the feelings he had and a bit about his own family situation, and agreed that his revisions should tell the story of his own family; that people in Amarillo needed to know what it was like for them. At the next revision, the student turned in the following essay except that it had some grammatical mistakes which we spent conference time correcting. This essay, like many of my students' papers, appeared in our campus paper as a guest column.

Essay #6 by a Laotian student

Since my family escaped from Laos, our entire lifestyle has changed. Changes in our living standards changed our family as well.

Before the Communists took over Laos, my family was happy, proud, and wealthy. My father and my uncle were businessmen. Dad and my uncle ran their own wood-processing industry. Dad also ran a transportation company. Dad earned lots of money from his businesses, enough for my family to live upon for a long time. We had lots of land, a beautiful home, and more.

Since 1975, when the Communists came in and took over Laos, everything has changed. Dad could not run his own business any more, because everything had to be run by the central government, or under their authority. Dad didn't like that system at all. Then he decided to shut down his businesses. The government must have gotten upset about this, because they tried to take my Dad to jail. Dad was too smart for that. He always managed to escape or hide.

As the situation in Laos became worse, Dad decided to take our family and escape to Thailand. Dad brought only a small amount of money, which was in dollars and bahts, with him. We spent all this money on food and clothing during our eight months in the refugee camp in Thailand. Then we had our chance to come to the United States.

My family had to start a new life in the United States. It was not easy for my family to adjust to a new living standard in this country. My parents didn't know any word of English, and neither did I. We faced the poorest moment of our lives. My parents felt so sad. They couldn't even walk with their heads up high. That made me feel kind of sad, too. That made me want to study, and have a bright future. I want to make them happy and proud. I want to prove to my parents that this is not yet the end of our happy lives. I want to see that my family gets happier than they had ever been before. My family has experienced an important change in our living standards. This change took everything from us. It has been a hard time for my family, and it won't be easy for us to get on our feet. We must keep trying. Hopefully, we can have a better life in our new country.

If I had decided what to do with the student's piece about unemployment without his input, I would have never discovered what he was really trying to write about. Sometimes, especially at the beginning of the term, I have to be very specific about the weaknesses I see in their papers, but I never begin with what

I think needs to be done. Instead, I usually start by asking which parts the student feels best about, and then, which part seems to be the weakest.[14] Asking why the student wrote about that particular topic will also open the door to discussing how he can achieve his purpose more effectively. Students are often very honest with me in admitting that they wrote because I told them they had to, and that the topic seemed like an easy/good/okay/ thing to write about. I am equally honest in telling students that writing for me is not a good reason to go through all the effort that good writing demands.

The following essay, again by the same student, is an example of a first draft produced later in the term, after the successful revisions of the previous essay.

Essay #7 by a Laotian student

The Spirits Still There

It has been a long time since the fall of Laos, but people of Laos will never forget what happened to their country that they love like their own eyes. Almost one-third of Laos populations escaped from their home and went on to live in the second or third countries. No matter where they are, the Lao people still have high hopes of getting back their homeland.

There were many times in Laos history that the country had fall into the enemies' hands, but the Lao people always regained their country back. This serves as an important confidence that the recent Lao people have on getting their country out of

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14 Carnicelli's article,("The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation." Urbana,Illinois:NCTE,1980) gives examples of successful and unsuccessful conferences and makes suggestions about the type of questions teachers can ask to encourage the student's criticism of his or her own work. I've found this information very helpful, especially when I first began conferencing.

enemies' hands. They always feel that their great-grandparents have fought and protected this land with their own lives, and why shouldn't they do the same thing. At least they can have something for their children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren to remember. They also feel that if they don't fight back their own country, nobody will. sooner or later, the map of Laos won't exist any more.

The Lao people know that the communists were eating up Laos. The communists took every valuable things, which Laos were rich of, from Laos to their own countries.

The people of Laos, who love their country so much and decided to stay in the country, have been punished by the communists' soldiers. The communists forced the people of Laos to work like animals.

This was an unforgetable and unforgivable event for the people of Laos. The madness and hates that the Lao people had on the communist were burried deeply inside the hearts of the Lao people. It's like a big wound inside the heart, which is not going to be good, unless they get their revenges.

Clearly this student still had some problems with his writing, but the level of involvement and the clarity of his communication was certainly better than what I had been able to elicit from him using traditional methods. I had the feeling that he finally understood what writing was and how powerful language could be in communicating what you know to others who don't know.

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